

Method for Retrieving Shipping Platforms

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

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5 The invention pertains to the field of methods of recycling and reuse of shipping platforms, including retrieving and returning shipping platforms from downstream receivers. More particularly, the invention pertains to identifying shipping platforms and using a computer network to identify, to retrieve, recycle, and/or return the shipping platforms back to the original shipper.

DESCRIPTION OF RELATED ART

10 Industries all over the world ship their goods using shipping platforms. Industries customize shipping platform specifications for the shipping of their product. Shipping platforms can be made out of a variety of materials, such as wood, plastic, and aluminum. Once the industries have shipped their product using the shipping platforms, the receiver then has to deal with all of the shipping platforms that are left. The receiver might not
15 have the knowledge of where each shipping platform has come from or whether it is reusable. This poses a problem for the receiver in terms of discarding the shipping platforms.

20 The receiver most often cannot grind the shipping platforms, which often led to the only alternative of placing them in a landfill. Some recycling companies or scrap dealers will accept shipping platforms from end recipients, but then they must determine where the shipping platforms should be sent or sold, or they will have to dispose of them.

25 Since there began to be a possibility of introducing harmful chemicals into the land from the shipping platforms, it has been an objective of the industries using shipping platforms to try and reuse them. In the process of meeting this objective there have been several patents issued in recent years. For example, Hyatt's "Recyclable Packaging System and Process for Using the Same," U.S. Patent No. 5,829,229, issued on Nov. 3, 1998, shows a system where a "resource manager" keeps an inventory of the trays used for

the assembly of a product. The trays that end up at the product manufacturer and at the purchaser as being in excess are returned to the Resource Manager through a reuse program and an 800 number. The Resource Manager cleans, repairs, and recycles the trays, which are then put back into the closed loop system.

Another example is Kralj's "Integrated Reusable Pallet Having Data Collection Devices and Method for Using Shipping Conveyances," U.S. Patent No. 5,971,592, issued on Oct. 26, 1999, shows a method of recycling shipping platforms that includes a built in computer chip (EPROM) to store the pallet information. When a pallet is received, it is assigned a permanent ID number by the computer at the Main Pallet Placement Office, which also tracks the location and use of the pallet. If the customer has no further use for the shipping platforms, the pallet provider is called to pick up the shipping platforms. The shipping platforms are taken back to a Receiver Pallet Placement Office which reads the electronic device and reports back to the Main Pallet Placement Office, who then bills the customers for use of the shipping platforms.

Bowling's "Method and Apparatus for Repairing Pallets," U.S. Patent No. 6,058,586, issued on May 9, 2000 deals mostly with the repairing of the pallets, in the process of repairing the pallets, an identifying indicia is placed on the pallet by the shipper repairing the pallet. The indicia only gives information regarding the repair shipper of the pallets.

The American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) has a standard practice for marking of pallets, practice D6253-98. This standard is voluntary and involves marking each pallet with a minimum of: name of pallet manufacturer, repair shipper, or owner identification code; industry or government specification that was followed to produce the pallet; month and year the pallet was produced; and whether the pallet will have multiuse (M), limited use (L), or repair (R). This standard is voluntary and does not provide a means of return. Plus, the codes that are used are not standard throughout the entire industry, making it difficult for everyone to use them.

The computer industry has also established specifications for pallets used in their industry, including marking pallets with a material classification mark, supplier designation, country of manufacture of the pallet, date of manufacture of the pallet, the

part number, the engineering change number, and the reusable pool system symbol. This shows that the industry is coming to realize that need to identify shipping platforms. This mark does not specify where the pallets need to go after they have been used, furthermore, these markings do not pertain to a shipper using the mark or stencil for recycling purposes.

Other such marks that specify a certain pallet have been used since the end of World War II in Europe, such as EUR. This stamp only identifies that it is the specific pallet made in Europe and does not identify an original shipper or provide a means of return. Other marks such as CP1-9, CHEP, and PECO which only say "property of" also identify specific pallets but do not provide a means of returning the pallets.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The invention is a method for identifying, retrieving, and returning shipping platforms from downstream receivers through the use of an identification stenciling program and a website or other computer network connection. The process starts by a shipper entering into the program with a coordinator to retrieve shipping platforms. The coordinator assigns an identification to the type of platform and creates a page within their web site with the shipping platform's numbers and other information regarding the shipper, as well as the construction, and repair of the shipping platforms. The identification is stenciled on all shipping platforms in the program, and includes a logo or other indication that the identification belongs to the program.

The end receivers of the shipping platforms (which might be recipients of the goods, or recyclers or scrap dealers) register the type, quantity, and permanent number found on the shipping platforms at the program's web site. The coordinator may inform the end receiver of the proper repair specifications (if applicable) for the particular type of shipping platforms, based on the information on the web page for that type of platform.

The shipper or other buyers can search the web site for certain types of shipping platforms. When more information is needed regarding the shipping platforms, the coordinator contacts the end receiver to retrieve the information for the shipper or buyer. If the buyer or shipper wishes to proceed with a sale, an amount is agreed upon and paid to

the coordinator. The coordinator then pays the end receiver for the platforms, for example, a percentage of the sales amount.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

Fig. 1 shows a flow diagram, which describes the method of the present invention.

5 Fig. 2 shows an example of the stencil provided to the shipper by the coordinator with the assigned number and program logo.

Fig. 3 shows an example of the web page created within the web site for a shipping platform.

Fig. 4 shows an example of a web page where the end recipients register the number of program platforms they have.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The method of the invention allows companies to retrieve shipping platforms that were used from down stream receivers, saving money on having to produce new shipping platforms with certain specifications to ship their product, and saves the shipper money on the cost of buying shipping platforms. At the same time the method decreases the amount of shipping platforms going to the landfill, increases the amount of revenue to recyclers, and decreases landfill expenses.

Figure 1 shows a flowchart outlining the steps in the method to accomplish the goal of retrieving a shipper's shipping platforms.

- 20 (1) The process starts by the shipper entering into the program to retrieve shipping platforms.
- (2) A permanent number or other identification is issued which corresponds to the particular shipping platforms that the shipper is interested in retrieving. A separate identifier is assigned for every platform having a distinct specification, specified by that shipper. The numbers are preferably not assigned to used shipping platforms or shipping platforms manufactured with reclaimed lumber.

- (3) The coordinator creates a separate page within its web site that has information specific to the shipping platform and the shipper.
- (4) The coordinator sends the platform manufacturer or shipper a stencil design, including the identification and material indicating membership in the program, for putting on shipping platforms.
- (5) The shipper then uses the stenciled shipping platforms to ship their products to direct recipients. The "direct recipients" are those parties who receive the shipping platforms in the course of their life as product-handling items, such as transporters, warehouseurs, wholesalers, brokers, retail stores or other distributors of the shipper's products. Because at this point the movement of goods, rather than the shipping platforms, is the driving force, the shipping platforms may pass through many hands with the products upon them, before they will once again become the subject of the method of the invention.
- (6) After the direct recipients are finished using the shipping platforms, they will progress eventually to an "end recipient" - a recycler, a scrap dealer, or perhaps even the direct recipient itself, depending on the particulars of the industry and the parties. The "end recipient" is the one who winds up with the shipping platforms once their use as product-handling items is over. At this point, it is the disposition of the shipping platforms (rather than the goods upon them) which is of interest, and the shipping platform is the focus of the method of the invention once again.
- (7) The end recipient, seeing the stencil on the shipping platforms, which indicate they are registered in the program, then lists the shipping platforms on the website using a remote computer that accesses the web site.
- (8) The coordinator informs the shipper of the number of available shipping platforms.
- (9) The shipping platforms are checked to see if they are repairable, based on the specifications that are laid out by the shipper in the web page.
- (10) If the shipping platforms do need to be repaired, they are repaired (preferably, sent to a repair facility, although the repairs could be

done by the recycler/end recipient). The specifications regarding the repairs are provided as they were set by the shipper on the web page. The repair facility repairs the shipping platforms.

(11) The end recipient then returns or sells the platforms to shippers or third party companies using the web site. When a shipper buys back the shipping platforms, the shipper uses them to ship out products once again (returning to step 5).

The sale and transfer of the platform could be done by the steps of the shipper asking for more information regarding the shipping platforms listed on the web site; the coordinator notifying the end recipient of the need for more information; the end recipient supplying additional information to the coordinator; the coordinator giving the needed information to the shipper; the shipper paying the coordinator the amount agreed upon for the shipping platforms; and the coordinator paying the end receiver a percentage of the sale amount.

Figure 2 shows a stencil (20), which the coordinator might assign to a shipper. The stencil has the toll free number of the coordinator (21) along with the web site (22) address. The stencil also has a program prefix (24) (here, "GP") plus the specific identification (here, a number) (23) that was assigned to the shipper's particular shipping platform.

Figure 3 shows an example of the web page (30) in the coordinator web site for a shipper's shipping platforms. The page might include a shipper profile (31), and will preferably include an image of the shipping platform (32), details of repair for the shipping platform (33) (perhaps including specifications for making new shipping platforms of this kind, the type of lumber that can be used when making repairs, nails or hardware to be used, standards for excessive wear or contamination requiring retirement from the pool, and so on) and possibly other facts such as the annual usage number for the shipper or the like, or international acceptance of the platform. This screen also preferably has a tab or other link (34) which allows an end recipient, having received a quantity of shipping platforms with the logo (20), and having gone to the website (22), and found the shipping platform type screen (30), to "list shipping platforms" for sale.

Figure 4 shows an example of a web page (40), which might be used by end recipients to list the shipping platforms they have available for sale. The page might include the quantity (41) of the shipping platforms the end receiver has for sale, a pull down list (43) of the specific numbers (23) that were assigned to a shipper's particular shipping platforms. The page might also include a place for notes (42) regarding the shipping platforms the end receiver is putting up for sale and a place to enter the price (44) the end receiver is charging for the shipping platforms.

Accordingly, it is to be understood that the embodiments of the invention herein described are merely illustrative of the application of the principles of the invention. Reference herein to details of the illustrated embodiments is not intended to limit the scope of the claims, which themselves recite those features regarded as essential to the invention.

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